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# Learning New Languages: A Guide to Second Language Acquisition

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## Learning New Languages: A Guide to Second Language Acquisition

**Tom Scovel (2000)**

**Boston: Heinle & Heinle**

**Pp. 158.**

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This book, a volume in Heinle's new TeacherSource series, is intended for ESL/EFL teachers who have an interest in the topic of learning languages. As the subtitle says, *Learning New Languages: A Guide to Second Language Acquisition* provides a general introduction to the field of second language acquisition, but the organization of the book is more detailed than that of Rod Ellis's *The Study of Second Language Acquisition* and Diane Larsen-Freeman's and Mitchell Johnson's *Second Language Acquisition*. In contrast to these books, Scovel incorporates insights from his own experiences, as well as numerous accounts from various learners to augment his explanation. Scovel's argument that "there are five major contexts in which languages are acquired and, despite their academically impressive appellations, it probably more helpful to use simple and straightforward titles" is a good one. The five contexts as the titles and topics for each of the book's key chapters.

Scovel calls these five domains people, language, attention, cognition, and emotion. "Alth

particular categories have also been chosen because the acronym the labels spell out  $\text{ÆPI}$  where all language learning takes 'place' (p. 3).

Chapter two, 'People,' is a crisp introduction to the role social factors play in the learning of a second language. Scovel discusses several psychological models of human behavior that have been developed to explain language learning: the behavioral, innatist, and social interactionist models of first language acquisition. He also discusses several models: Schumann's acculturation, Acton's perceived social distance, and Giles's speech accommodation theory. He also discusses language planning and Kachru's famous trinary categorization of 'World Englishes.' He then discusses the subject of bilingual education, noting that "In essence, the debate is between two different models of education for the children of the many immigrants who come to America to acquire fluency in English" (p. 3).

The third chapter, 'Languages,' is an analysis of how one's mother language influences the acquisition of a second language. He discusses the topics of interference, intraference, interlanguage, and the distinction between mistakes and errors. He also discusses research that has been done on the fairly recent and frequently overlooked topic of avoidance. He notes that "learners do not to use grammatical structures that would normally be used by native speakers in that language because they are significantly with the grammar of their mother tongue" (p. 57). Because this avoidance results in a less than optimal speech and writing, it is obviously difficult for SLA researchers to accurately measure this phenomenon. Scovel takes the reader through an important experiment that was done by Kleinmann which measured avoidance and gives a brief introduction to the importance of statistics in SLA research while explaining Kachru's trinary categorization.

The next chapter, 'Attention,' is a detailed discussion of the psychological construct attention. Scovel notes that attention is the centerpiece of the entire learning process because it "frames our entire experience . . . it regulates the flow of people and linguistic input, and the internal realm of thoughts and feelings, it is a constraining factor in the entire aspect of language learning" (pp. 71, 89). To emphasize this point, Scovel writes about the importance of attention in neuropsychology, memory, perception, linguistic input and form, as well as Tomlin and Vanderschueren's work.

In chapter five, 'Cognition,' he asserts that "Cognition explains everything. Attention may be the most important component of cognition accounts for all the other components that make up the model of SLA . . . for cognition is the central component of our social, linguistic, attentional and emotional behavior" (p. 91). He then examines the relationship between cognition and schemata, differentiates between the commonly confused categories of processes, strategies, and procedures, and provides accounts to illustrate his points. Scovel then writes about memory, cognitive styles, language acquisition, the null hypothesis and the relationship between age and SLA.

Chapter 6, 'Emotion,' explains how our emotions influence the way in which we learn a second language. Scovel discusses anxiety, and empathy, Scovel also briefly mentions other affective variables like extroversion, self-esteem, and self-confidence. His general conclusion about the place of emotions in SLA is that "we are still struggling to understand that they could very well end up being the most influential force in language acquisition, but we are not demonstrating such a claim. A large part of the problem is the wide variety of constructs that have been used to measure emotion. More than any other topic covered in this book, affective variables are the area that SLA researchers have the most difficulty with."

The final chapter is a summing up of the main themes of the book. Scovel breaks these the conclusions he makes are “Individual students differ from each other far more than any o . . . .Students are always paying attention: the real question is, to What? . . . .Content and di language learning behavior . . . .Emotions are neither good nor bad; they are simply a natu 148, 149).

All in all, this is an informative and handy general introduction to the complex field of SLA generally well supported. Although the book is only 158 pages long, he covers all the basic readings and the book’s general bibliography is comprehensive and suitable for the gener book, a drawback which is not unique to Scovel’s book, but unfortunately seems indigeno guides to language learning, namely the penchant by authors to use homily or trite metap processes. Scovel throughout uses them, from the first chapter where he compares under human nutrition (p. 1-2), in chapter five he compares cognition to a refrigerator (p.116), in separating attention from variables like memory and perception to “a professor struggling at the end of a week” (p. 89), and there are others. The point is that in many of these cases simplistic and ultimately distracting from what is being discussed.

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